



BELFER CENTER POLICY MEMO

Afghans on the Taliban

BOTTOM LINES

- Policy makers should focus on improved governance in the provinces due to the Afghan people's desire for efficient and transparent administrative services.
- Corruption stemming from the misuse of aid is a key factor in the weak structure of government. As a result, greater attention should be paid to how reconstruction projects are implemented and to improving the perceptions of the Government of Afghanistan by local Afghans, ensuring it earns credit for delivering tangible benefits to communities in a non-corrupt manner.

By Sabrina Roshan

By and large, the people of Afghanistan are driven by a desire for administration and order - not by money or supreme ideology. Despite its oppressive tactics, the Taliban regime has managed to seize power and sustain it by filling a vacuum of social instability. Wardak province, which lies just three hours outside of Kabul, is a major Taliban stronghold in central Afghanistan today. The Taliban's seizure of power in Wardak serves as a microcosm of the social and political dynamics at play in the entire country. If left unchecked, more and more parts of Afghanistan risk falling into the hands of these non-governmental, rebel powers.

MOTIVATIONS: SUPPORT AND APATHY

The general consensus among the villagers from Wardak is that there are two types of Taliban: one group that is composed of the "legitimate" Taliban and the other group made up of local criminals and hoodlums looking to profit from the chaotic situation (the latter group is not a uniform entity, but is composed of a fragmented network of gangs). The Taliban has sought to differentiate itself from these gangs. Mullah Omar, the head of the Taliban's Quetta Commission, is responsible for appointing senior-level members of the legitimate group. The Commission is a structure,

which serves as a parallel government that provides the actual Taliban with appropriate paperwork. The renegade groups fail to hold any of these official documents.

The Taliban has managed to carve its way into the social fabric by resolving civic issues on behalf of the people in a timely and hassle-free manner. Through official government channels, those same villagers would have to pay numerous bribes and experience significant delays in getting their issues resolved. In addition, the Taliban are able to provide transparent justice when dealing with criminals, whereas the government often releases convicted criminals in exchange for bribes and other private dealings. The majority of petty crimes, including robbery, vandalism, and occasionally more severe crimes, like kidnappings, are committed by the illegitimate hoodlum groups who are often prosecuted by the Taliban itself. Government corruption and inefficiency has opened the door for the Taliban to legitimize itself among the people of Afghanistan.

THE ANATOMY OF A CONQUEST

The Taliban enters villages by offering dispute resolution, using forced deliverance, and disseminating propaganda. They tend to be elusive and refrain from oc-

cupying specific parameters or spaces. The three most common forms of village occupation take place using the following approaches:

1. Dispute Resolution

One form of village occupation involves settling disputes between members of the same village. Once informed of a dispute in the village, the Taliban enter the area at night with motorcycles and take the disputing parties to a mosque and help them resolve the issue swiftly and efficiently. They do not ask the parties involved for membership, but they do provide instructions on how to practice the Islamic religion properly. In addition, they ask for recognition of their regime and system in return for their services. This tends to be the most effective method due to the high level of corruption within the Afghan National Police and the Judiciary which precludes the government from properly addressing the administrative and civic processes that the villagers are in need of solving.

The largest of such ordinary civic problems and petitions include attaining national identity cards and settling land disputes. The government sends villagers from office to office, where they are required to pay government bureaucrats before the appropriate papers become cleared. Instead, the Taliban are able to solve the issue in 30 minutes by providing five judges and doing their best to come to a clear verdict at the end of the process. However, if one of the parties involved disagrees with the verdict that the Taliban has come to, and goes to the government with the complaint, they are ultimately signing their death sentence.

2. Forced Deliverance

A second form of village occupation takes place at night and involves the distribution of leaflets via motorcycle. The leaflets state that from that moment on, villagers should not go to government offices for their civic and criminal justice needs - they should instead go to the Taliban. The Taliban also used networking to pass along the message. Since many members of the Taliban have held positions of governance in the country for several years, they have numerous politi-

cal contacts and communicate instructions through them. The Taliban ask that information regarding who they are and their purpose (to manage provincial administration) in addition to their rule of law requirement, be disseminated to the people in the villages.

3. Propaganda and Influence

Lastly, men can also join the Taliban voluntarily based on personal contacts. The men are asked to sign-up and are instructed to come to a certain mosque to begin the process. The motivation to seek the Taliban out is related to social and psychological factors. In Afghanistan, young men tend to want to be part of a selective, inclusive, influential, and notorious group. This is buttressed by a series of “public relations” tactics (although usually these tactics are used by the fragmented gangs, sometimes the Taliban employs them as well). The most prominent of these tactics include text messaging propaganda campaigns and parading groups of seemingly invincible men in motorcycle gangs through the villages, enticing the young men to join. For older men, the motivations are a different. Older men in Afghan society look to become part of politically significant organizations where they are given a voice in the reform process, which often involves seeking membership in the respected, legitimate Taliban groups.

WEAK GOVERNANCE AND CORRUPTION

The improvement of governance and the curbing of corruption are directly related. The three most common causes for corruption among the people are:

1. Forced corruption – Civil service and administrative positions that provide salaries so low, employees have no other option but to take part in order to feed their families.
2. Habitual corruption – Endemic culture of bribing that has emerged in a population entangled in 30 years of war.
3. Large scale corruption – Politicians and business officials who take part in illicit government con-

tracting and business development schemes. Narcotics activity also falls in this category.

When the poor of the country see that large scale corruption is taking place, especially among their local government officials, habitual and forced corruption becomes more commonplace. It is at this point that corruption trickles down to the daily services procedures those interviewed protested about the most.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS

Therefore, attention needs to be paid to the reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan that complete the “clear, hold and build” strategy. It is not sufficient to just build. There is tremendous importance in who is doing the building, why they are doing it and how it is being done. This is because the misuse of aid money for rebuilding purposes seems to be the greatest profiteering source for those in power.

When entrenched interests influence who wins a contract to build a road, school or dam, and when that project is then allocated amongst smaller agencies to implement, and when bribes are paid for the monitoring and evaluation of the project and the end result is an inadequate road, school or dam - the people of ru-

ral Afghanistan are directly affected. This deep awareness and understanding of dishonesty involving those in power by the people is tied to a culture of endemic corruption.

These factors all contribute to the perceptions of Western linked reconstruction among the people of Afghanistan. And it is perception that will ultimately determine the future of U.S. counterinsurgency strategy in the country.

If building is not managed and coordinated effectively, the efforts of clearing and holding will be futile. Whether it is through greater incentives to curb corruption at the lower level and/or greater monitoring and evaluation at the higher level - clearing the local governments of their association with corruption will create a more efficient administrative system and garner the support of the people.

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Ibrahim, Azeem. “Testing the NATO Alliance: Afghanistan and the Future of Cooperation.” *Harvard International Review*, Summer 2009.
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